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Hill panel probes allegations of Soviet tie in pope shooting

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A Hill panel began collecting testimony yesterday linking the Soviet Union to the 1981 attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II.

The Helsinki Commission, made up of 12 members of Congress and formed after the Helsinki Accords of 1975, monitors violations of the agreement.

Author Claire Sterling, an expert in terrorist activities, continued to suggest that the Soviet Union, through the KGB and the secret service of Bulgaria, were the "hidden forces" behind the gunman, Mehmet Ali Agca.

Sterling recently wrote a Reader's Digest article tracing the path of Agca from his birthplace in Turkey to St. Peter's Square in Rome.

"In Italy, as nearly everywhere else in the West, governing leaders could hardly welcome hard evidence of Soviet Russia's complicity in a terrorist hit deliberately designed to outrage and shock the world, she told the commission. "The impact on international relations might be

shattering. The temptation to look the other way might prove irresistible again, as it has so frequently before."

Sterling, under questioning by Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, R-N.Y., said she has not been questioned by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) despite months of gathering information on the gunman.

"I find it shocking that you have not been approached by the intelligence community," D'Amato said.

D'Amato, meanwhile, revealed that he may have been the source for an NBC report earlier this week that the pope threatened to resign and return to Poland if Russia moved to crush the Solidarity movement. The threat was contained in a private letter the pope sent to Soviet President Leonid I. Brezhnev, an NBC spokesman said.

D'Amato remarked during the hearing that he knew the "monsignor" who carried the message. Later, outside the hearing room, he said he could not name the monsignor at this time.

The theory that Russia wanted to remove the pope because of his close

ties to Poland and the growing strength of Solidarity has been suggested by both Sterling and NBC. The Vatican, meanwhile, remains silent on whether or not the letter was sent by the pope. Polish authorities eventually clamped down on the Polish labor movement while the pope slowly recovered from his wounds.

D'Amato told the hearing, "I am convinced that the Soviet KGB had full knowledge of, and, at least tacitly, supported the plot to kill the pope." He said the pope's actions toward human rights movements in Poland "clearly annoyed officials in the Kremlin."

In a report to members of the commission, the staff said new evidence supports the claim that the assassin "did not act alone."

It said: "He is not a Muslim fanatic, or religious at all; he is not an active rightist or nationalist in Turkish terms; he is not stupid, ignorant, mentally unbalanced or a psychopath. Agca is an international terrorist, trained to kill, managed and financially supported by some 'organized' element."